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- 1 Collomp, Catherine and Bruno Groppo. Eds and Introduction. *An American in Hitler's Berlin: Abraham Plotkin's Diary, 1932-33*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, at Urbana and Chicago, 2009. xiii-xlix + pp 272.
- 2 'Why is there no socialism in the United States?' is a question that has interested quite a few European observers of the American scene – most notably the German sociologist Werner Sombart. 'Why is there socialism in Germany?' and 'what does it look like?' are questions that interested Abraham Plotkin (1892-1988). An American of Jewish-Russian origin, Plotkin visited Germany from November 1932 to May 1933 and jotted down his observations in a diary. He was a largely self-taught labor organizer who worked for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in California. In 1931, however, the Depression forced the ILGWU to relieve itself of part of its staff. Plotkin was among those who were sacked. Rather than seek employment with another trade union, Plotkin's political curiosity impelled him to sail for Germany in the fall of 1932. "The most important reason of all, I suspect, is the possibility of real developments in Germany this winter. If anything happens, I want to be on the ground" (9), he confided to his diary.
- 3 Elegantly edited by the Paris-based labor historians Catherine Collomp and Bruno Groppo, Plotkin's diary has now been published for the first time. Entitled *An American in Hitler's Berlin: Abraham Plotkin's Diary, 1932-33* the book renders a harrowing picture of Berlin ravaged by the Depression, the Weimar Republic's last months and the onset of Nazism. On a subtler level, Plotkin's life writing also represents an immigrant's depiction of his return to the continent of his birth: His father was a kosher butcher who had worked near the Ukrainian city of Ekaterinoslav until he decided to take his family to the New World in 1901. Plotkin was nine years old at the time.
- 4 Plotkin's diary resembles a pendulum swinging from optimism to pessimism and back again. On the optimistic side, he recorded everything he was able to learn about the German system of labor relations – a system long regarded as "the model of social modernism" (xxi) by American progressives. It included unions organized along industries rather than trades, an alignment between unionism and social democracy as opposed to the United States' "pure and simple trade unionism" and unemployment

insurance in crises rather than the division of work between workers. Plotkin lauded Germany's labor courts which arbitrated in cases of workplace disputes. He was fascinated by the "Waldsiedlung Zehlendorf" – a settlement of modern workers' houses on the wooded outskirts of Berlin. Plotkin perceived the grand headquarters of German unions (such as the IG Metall's building in Berlin) as "the modern temples of a modern movement" (50).

- 5 From Plotkin's point of view, Germany (which also provided insurance in cases of illness and old age) was socially ahead of America. His diary reads as though he stumbled upon something utterly precious. The spirit reminds one of Pierre Bourdieu's conviction. The French sociologist once referred to the European welfare state as something that was as priceless as Kant, Beethoven, Pascal and Mozart. Yet Plotkin's experience was tragically ironic: The German system of social democratic relations was doomed. Plotkin witnessed it shortly before the Nazis destroyed it (cf. Collomp and Groppo xxii).
- 6 On the pessimistic side, Plotkin recorded the instability of Weimar's liberal democracy, the ascent of the Nazis, street clashes between communists and fascist storm troopers and the inability of the Republic's democratic parties (the social-democratic SPD, the Catholic Zentrum and the social-liberal DDP) to avert disaster. He attended Nazi Party rallies (at one, Joseph Goebbels addressed the crowd), joined in SPD counter-rallies and even experienced the nascent anti-Semitism himself: "I do not speak to Jews!" (106), was the response he received from a woman when he inquired about a Nazi parade. The climax and ending of Plotkin's narrative were devoted to events on February 27th, 1933. On that day, he attended the SPD's final, desperate effort to mobilize the country's democrats against the fascist threat. The rally "Berlin Remains Red" held in the city's "Sportpalast" culminated in thousands of voices crying "Freedom, Freedom, Freedom". But to no avail: The police dissolved the meeting. A few hours later, the Reichstag (which housed the German parliament) burned to the ground. "The Reichstag! That is as if the Capitol in Washington were burned!" (173), Plotkin remarked.
- 7 *An American in Hitler's Berlin* is a rich, subtle and extremely readable account of a crucial moment in German history. The vividness with which the *flâneur* Plotkin reports his urban encounters (e.g. the omission of punctuation marks in dialogues) links his diary to other works of the Berlin genre – the most famous being Alfred Döblin's expressionist *Alexanderplatz* (cf. Collomp and Groppo xxxvi). As opposed to writings by Germans however, Plotkin's autobiographical account includes a whole array of interesting comparisons between the United States' and Germany's social systems – comparisons that make reading the volume all the more worthwhile.
- 8 Finally, the diary reminds one of something that one is wont to forget: It recalls the American Jewish left's noble efforts to rescue German gentile labor activists from the clutches of the Nazis. Had Plotkin not established contacts with union leaders such as Martin Plettl, president of the German Clothing Workers' Union, the *Jewish Labor Committee* perhaps would not have been able to rescue the individuals it did.
- 9 Mark Kalbus (Mainz, Germany)